

Our views: The stimulus effect

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Federal money boosting Brevard schools shows emergency program's progress

The jobs of 900 teachers saved in Brevard County public schools.

Among those, 37 teachers who instruct students with disabilities or special needs, and others who work with the poorest kids in the district.

Still other teachers in schools from Titusville to Palm Bay that are allowing administrators to keep class sizes small to enhance learning.

Those are some of the benefits our community is receiving from the \$787 billion economic stimulus package Congress passed and President Obama signed in late February to combat the recession.

It shows the program is making progress in creating or saving 3.5 million jobs, with about \$100 billion pumped into the economy through June.

The stimulus was never designed as a cure-all to stop job losses but to help cushion the blow as part of an extraordinary emergency effort that included stabilizing the banks, lowering interest rates to rock-bottom levels and trying to stem the foreclosure crisis.

Six months later, many economists say it's having an impact, helping the economy bottom out faster than it would have otherwise and begin the embryonic recovery that appears to be starting.

Estimates of jobs created or saved differ, with the White House saying 1 million and some economists saying half that number. A clearer picture will come next month when states begin quarterly reports on how stimulus money is spent and how many jobs are directly produced.

When the measure became law, the White House predicted it would save 206,000 jobs in Florida.

It should be remembered the program — crafted to provide a boost over two years — is just now ready to hit its stride with direct government spending on infrastructure projects and other programs that create jobs immediately starting to get under way.

The first wave of spending came in tax cuts, tax rebates and money for safety-net programs such as expanded unemployment benefits and health care. There also was a massive infusion of aid to states such as Florida, which took \$4 billion to avert a budget catastrophe.

Some \$50 million of that went to Brevard Public Schools, where children are continuing to learn because teachers are in the classroom and not in the unemployment line, where 10.8 percent of Brevard workers are now standing.

There's no doubt the figure would be higher without the stimulus, which in turn would have further worsened Brevard's economy with its contagion of more foreclosed homes, more lost health insurance and more trouble putting food on the table.

"I'm grateful for my job," said Cocoa High algebra teacher Debbie Byrnes in a FLORIDA TODAY story Sunday that detailed the benefits stimulus spending is having in local schools. "It's important for me to come back because these kids need the stability of having someone come back for them."

None of this is to say the program is perfect. It should be subjected to tough accountability to make sure the money is properly spent and will remain the object of scorn from detractors who refuse to believe it was necessary.

But Republican critics in Congress are noticeably more muted as stimulus money saves jobs in their states and they happily, if quietly, take it.

That's what happened in Tallahassee, where members of the GOP-controlled Legislature attacked the stimulus in public but thanked their lucky stars in private and gladly accepted the money because it saved their hides from a state fiscal meltdown.

With unemployment heading toward 10 percent nationally, the country still has a deep economic hole to dig itself out of.

But the hole would be much deeper still without the stimulus and is why the program was — and remains — a correct course of action.